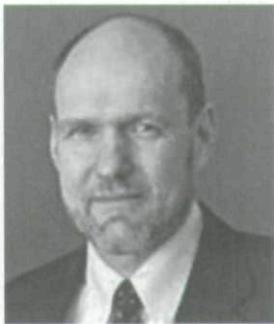


## Viewpoints

# The Israel Lobby

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The Israel lobby is a subject that has to be handled with a certain degree of care and sensitivity. Any discussion of the lobby's influence takes place in the shadow of centuries of anti-Semitism—including tragic events like the Holocaust—and that history makes people wary whenever anyone talks about political activities of Israel's supporters in the United States or suggests that the policies they have been advocating are misguided. In our book, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*,<sup>1</sup> we clearly state our belief in Israel's legitimacy and its right to exist. Indeed, we argue that the U.S. should come to Israel's aid if its survival is ever in jeopardy. But we also maintain that the activities of the Israel lobby and, indeed, the special relationship between the U.S. and Israel, are topics that reasonable people ought to be able to talk about openly and candidly. This article will examine the influence of the Israel lobby and argue that the policies it encourages are not in the American national interest, in Israel's interest, or in the interests of Israel's Arab neighbors.

### Why the Special Relationship?

The late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin once said that American support for Israel is “beyond compare in modern history,” and he was right. Israel is the largest recipient of American economic and military aid — over \$3 billion each year, or about \$500 per year for each Israeli citizen — even though Israel is now a prosperous country with a per-capita income that is now 29<sup>th</sup> in the world. Israel gets consistent support from the United States in diplomatic venues such as the United Nations, and Washington almost always takes Israel's side in regional quarrels. Israel's actions are rarely criticized by American officials, and certainly not by anyone running for

<sup>1</sup> Mearsheimer, John J. and Stephen M. Walt. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007.

higher office in the U.S. The question is: Why is this the case?

Four reasons are usually given to explain this “special relationship.” The first rationale is that Israel is a vital strategic asset. That may have been true during the Cold War, but the Cold War is now over. Today, it is hard to argue that giving Israel unconditional support is making the United States more popular around the world or making Americans safer at home; if anything, the opposite is the case. On balance, the special relationship is now a strategic liability for the United States.

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A second justification is that Israel is a democracy that “shares American values.” Israel is indeed a democracy, but there are many democracies around the world and none of them get the level of support that Israel does. Moreover, the basis for American democracy and Israeli democracy are not identical. America is a liberal democracy where citizens of any race or religion are supposed to have equal rights; by contrast, Israel was founded as a Jewish state and non-Jews are treated as second-class citizens. The United States is not an “Anglo-Saxon state” or a “Christian state,” but Israel was conceived and founded as a Jewish state. There is nothing wrong with Israel being a Jewish state, of course; the point is simply that the core values of Israeli and American democracy are not identical. It is also worth noting that Israel’s treatment of its Arab citizens and especially its Palestinian subjects are sharply at odds with core U.S. values and global human rights standards. Thus, “shared values” cannot explain the “special relationship.”

Third, some argue that the United States has a special relationship with Israel because its behavior has been more moral than that of its adversaries. But this argument does not work either. Any reasonably fair-minded look at the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict — including the accounts written by Israel’s “new Historians” — shows that both sides have done many cruel things to each other and that neither owns the moral high ground. Israel has not acted *worse* than other states do, but neither has it acted substantially better. Thus, one cannot explain the special relationship by arguing that Israel’s behavior has been exemplary and that it, therefore, deserves unconditional U.S. support.

Finally, it is sometimes argued that the United States has a special relationship with Israel because public opinion is strongly pro-Israel and that politicians are just doing what the American people want. Once again,

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this argument is not persuasive. Americans do have a generally favorable image of Israel (in part because media coverage tends to favor Israel), but the general public is not insisting that government officials give Israel unconditional support. For example, a survey conducted by the Anti-Defamation League in 2005 found that 78% of Americans thought that the United States should favor *neither* side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a result reaffirmed in more recent surveys of U.S. opinion. In fact, a poll by the University of Maryland in 2003 found that over 70% of “politically active Americans” supported *cutting aid to Israel if it refused to settle the conflict*. Americans do have a favorable image of Israel and want it to survive and prosper, but they are not demanding that politicians support Israel no matter what it does.

### Is It the Lobby?

So the question remains: What explains Israel’s privileged position with the U.S.?

The real explanation for the special relationship is the political influence of the “Israel lobby.” The lobby is a loose coalition of individuals and groups that works openly in the American political system to promote the “special relationship.” Interest groups are at the center of how American politics works, and this has been true ever since the United States was founded. Freedom of association is guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution, and citizens of all types can form groups and organizations on any issue they care about and use those organizations to try and convince politicians to do what they want. These interest groups include teachers, farmers, labor unions, doctors, corporations and lawyers (and many other interests), and these groups can do lots of different things to influence the political process. For example, they can give money to candidates running for office or organize letter-writing campaigns telling politicians how to vote. They can write books and articles advocating their point of view, in order to encourage other people to support their cause as well. Interest groups can also put pressure on newspapers, TV and radio stations, so that these media organizations present information and opinion that supports the policies these groups favor. This is completely normal and legitimate behavior in American politics; it is how the American political system works.

So what is the Israel lobby? Key organizations in this loose coalition include the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC); the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the

Anti-Defamation League; Christian groups like Christians United for Israel, and the Zionist Organization of America. The lobby also includes pro-Israel think tanks like the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and publications like the *Weekly Standard* or the *New Republic* that take a consistently a pro-Israel line. That is a broad definition of an interest group, but interest groups in the United States often have lots of different components. For example, the environmental movement includes groups like Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, the Woods Hole Institute, and many other organizations, the same way that the Israel lobby does.

### Just Another Interest Group

The Israel lobby is not a single centralized organization, and the groups that make up the lobby do not agree on every single issue. For instance, some organizations in the lobby support a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians while other groups are vehemently opposed. The common position that all these groups share, however, is a commitment to preserve that “special relationship.” Thus, even leftwing groups like Americans for Peace Now do not call for the United States to reduce its support for Israel, even when Israel does things that are inimical to peace, such as building settlements in the West Bank.

The lobby is not a cabal or a conspiracy, and it does not control U.S. foreign policy. Rather, the Israel lobby is just an interest group—albeit a very influential one—and it operates the way that other powerful interest groups do.

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It is also important to realize that the lobby is not synonymous with Jewish Americans. Surveys show that about 25-30% of Jewish Americans do not care very much about Israel one way or the other, and many others do not support the positions of the most powerful groups in the lobby. Moreover, some of the groups that work to promote the special relationship, such as the so-called Christian Zionists, are not Jewish. *The lobby is defined by its political agenda, not by religion and not by ethnicity.*

### Playing the Political Game

So how does it work? In the U.S. small groups often wield disproportionate influence, because they care a lot about a single issue and politicians can win their support without losing anyone else’s backing, if they do what these small but focused groups want. Like other interest

groups, the Israel lobby works to get people who are sympathetic to its views elected to office or appointed to key positions in the government. Groups in the lobby also try to persuade politicians to follow their policy agenda and work to give them clear incentives to follow their line. AIPAC, for example, has an annual budget of about \$50,000,000 and is very active on Capitol Hill, providing information to members of Congress, helping them draft legislation that helps Israel; providing them with talking points, and making it clear that opposing them will have negative consequences for their political careers. AIPAC is a very effective and highly professional organization with a very energetic grassroots base in the different parts of the United States.

Despite its name, AIPAC is not a “political action committee.” Political action committees (or “PACs”) are fundraising organizations that raise money for politicians who are running for office. AIPAC does not give money to politicians directly, but it does screen candidates for Congress by asking them to write a memorandum laying out their views on Middle East policy. If they say the right things, AIPAC will let political action committees that support Israel know about it so these organizations — of which there are about three dozen currently active in the U.S. — can direct campaign contributions to people who have “the right views” on the Middle East.

Over the last 15 years, pro-Israel political action committees have given about \$55,000,000 to people running for office in the United States. By comparison Arab-American groups, of which there are a handful, have given about \$800,000 in that same period. (These figures include only contributions by PACs themselves and do not include contributions made by individual U.S. citizens.) The balance of power is clear: \$55,000,000 on one side, \$800,000 on the other, and this goes a long way to explaining AIPAC’s considerable influence on Capital Hill.

The lobby does not win every time, of course, but anyone running for office knows it’s not a good idea to criticize Israel if you want to get elected. This is why Steven Rosen — the former AIPAC official who is now under indictment for passing classified information — once put a napkin in front of a journalist and said, “In 24 hours we can have the signature of 70 U.S. senators on this napkin.” And that is also why former President Bill Clinton said “AIPAC was better than anybody else lobbying [in Washington].” Former Congressman Lee Hamilton, who served in Congress for 34 years, said that “there’s no group that matches it; they are in a class by themselves.” Former Senator Fritz Hollings said (upon his retirement): “You can’t have an Israel policy other than what AIPAC gives you around here.” And that is why Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said in 2006, “Thank God we have

AIPAC, the greatest supporter and friend we have in the whole world.”

## Shaping Public Discourse

The other strategy the Israel lobby uses is to try and shape public discourse in the U.S. so that Israel is viewed favorably by Americans. Mainstream media in the U.S. tend to be very pro-Israel, especially in terms of editorial commentary and op-ed columnists. If one compares coverage and commentary in the U.S. to Europe or within Israel itself, views in the U.S. are much narrower. For example, in the major newspapers in the U.S., there simply is no equivalent to someone like an Akiva Eldar, Bradley Burston, Gideon Levy or Amira Hass, who write for *Ha'aretz* in Israel and are sometimes very critical of Israeli policy. The point is not that critics like them are always right and that pro-Israel commentators are always wrong; the point is that there is no one like them writing regularly in American mainstream media. Even so, groups in the lobby like the Anti-Defamation League organize and monitor media coverage and organize pressure campaigns to make sure that all publications represent a pro-Israel point of view and do not publish or broadcast things that are critical.

For example, when former President Jimmy Carter published his book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, groups in the lobby took out ads in U.S. newspapers that included the publisher's phone number and invited people to call and complain about Carter's book. Similarly, in the fall of 2007, after CNN broadcast a three-part series on Christian, Muslim and Jewish fundamentalism, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations urged members to take up the issue with companies that bought advertising time for this program on CNN. The purpose, of course, is to make sure CNN thinks twice about doing anything like this in the future because it might cost them advertising revenue.

Of course, these efforts to control discourse in the United States are not 100% effective. One occasionally sees news commentary that is critical of Israeli policy, and some books and articles do get published that are critical of the lobby and of the “special relationship.” So it is not accurate to say that the lobby “controls” the media in the U.S. Nonetheless, media coverage is heavily slanted in Israel's favor, and critical voices face an uphill battle to be heard.

Finally, efforts to stifle any criticism usually include smearing critics by accusing them of being anti-Semitic. Martin Peretz, the editor of the *New Republic*, wrote that Jimmy Carter will “go down in history as a Jew hater,” even though Carter’s stewardship of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty

probably did more for Israel's security than any other U.S. president had done. A hard-line pro-Israel newspaper, the *New York Sun*, published an article suggesting that Carter was sympathetic to Nazi-era war criminals. Similarly, when the non-partisan, highly respected human rights group Human Rights Watch criticized Israel's actions during the 2006 war in Lebanon, its director, Kenneth Roth, was repeatedly accused of being an anti-Semite even though Roth is himself Jewish and his father was a refugee from Nazi Germany. Human Rights Watch also criticized Hizbulah for its own violations of the laws of war, but this did not prevent Roth from being smeared.

### The Real Question

Leveling charges of anti-Semitism has been done for three reasons: first of all, to distract people from the real issue, which is American policy in the region; second, to deter people — because who wants to be labeled with an awful charge like anti-Semitism; and finally, to marginalize people in the public debate in the U.S. — because what political candidate would want to associate with anyone who had even been accused of anti-Semitism? The bottom line here is that there is, in fact, very little serious debate about support for Israel in the U.S., even at a moment in history when it is obvious to virtually everyone that American Middle East policy is failing badly. And, of course, not much discussion of that has been seen in the current presidential campaign. Instead, all the major candidates have gone to enormous lengths to pander to the lobby, and to convince its members that they will continue to give Israel unconditional support.

This situation would not be a problem if these policies that the major organizations in the lobby are pushing were the right ones. This is the real question: are the policies that the lobby supports in America's interest, or even in Israel's interest? As the next article in this section will show, the answer in both cases is "no."

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